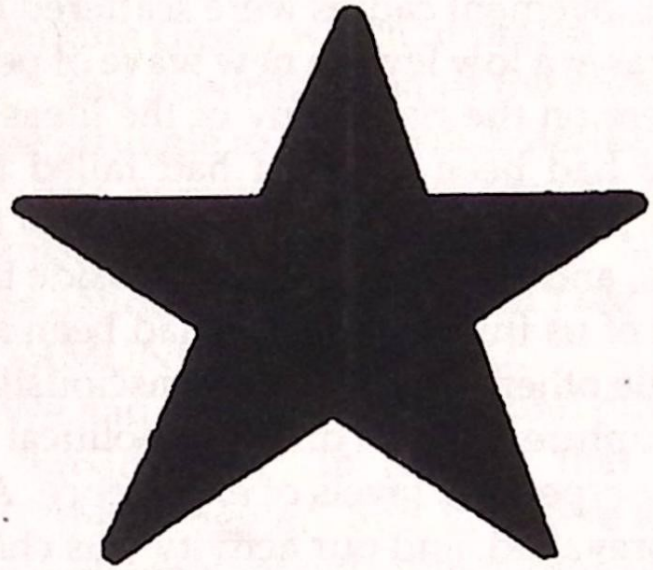
T/SOR/49/5/2/8

The Struggle Is For Land and Socialism!



An Interview With the New Afrikan Prisoners Organization (N.A.P.O.)

An Interview With The *New Afrikan Prisoners Organization (NAPO)*

(reprinted from Breakthrough, Spring 1982)

1. Q: Politically, why was NAPO formed, and out of what conditions did it emerge?

NAPO: The set of conditions in which We found ourselves in the mid-70s were essentially the same as those confronting our people everywhere, but We confronted these general conditions in the particular shape that prison gave to them. When We began to analyze these conditions, We tried to do so in an all-sided way, and moved from the general to the particular.

A weak revolutionary tendency had been diverted by counter-revolutionary force: The masses were disillusioned; the ranks of movement cadres were scattered and confused; all activity was at a low level; a new wave of petty-bourgeois "buffers" were on the rise; many of the ideas and forms of struggle that had been adopted had failed to fulfill their expectations. All of this, and more, was part of the general set of conditions, and had their reflection inside the walls.

Some of us inside the walls had been active prior to capture, while others had become consciously political and active after capture. We had differing political backgrounds, and differing types and levels of experience. A "small circle mentality" prevailed, and our activity was characterized by spontaneity.

So, in brief, these are the conditions, and the organization was formed so that We could begin to make a contribution to the national liberation struggle of our people in a more systematic and productive way.

1A. Q: Can you elaborate on the "small circle mentality" and

"spontaneity"?

NAPO: Well, the "small circle mentality" was basically an expression of ideological heterogeneity, and it couldn't help but express itself in organizational relations. When We began to recognize the problem and then deal with it, the effort took the form of a struggle against dogmatism.

Some of us were ex-BPP members; some were ex-CAP members, while others were ex-NOI members, and still others were "free agents". While all of us claimed "total commitment to 'the struggle'", the rule was that the ex-BPP members would spend most of their time together, and so would the other "small circles".

Some of us were still debating the merits of the "foco" as a method which was totally opposed to "mass organizing"; some still believed all white folks were devils; others believed We couldn't win independence without "achieving unity in the working class", which in practice means "white working class," and subordination of the New Afrikan national liberation struggle to the North Amerikkkan struggle. Some of us called ourselves "black Marxist-Leninists" or "Marxist-Leninist-Mao Tsetung Thoughters" and denied the existence of the nation because they didn't see any reference to it in the COMMUNIST MANIFESTO.

While We had these differences, and others, We were able to find "broad unity" in the fact that We were all "involved" in "the struggle," and We were at our best in attempting to work together only when issues or crises arose — only to "dissolve" again once the issue had been resolved. It was at times like these that spontaneity most glaringly revealed itself, but it was also manifested in daily routine: individually, inside each small circle, or taking our motley group as a whole, We would READ, but there was very little STUDY, research, or analysis, or summation of experiences. We didn't know what We'd be doing from one day to the

next, and there was no formalization of work style, no detailed systematic methods of carrying out tasks and functions of organized revolutionary activity.

1B. Q: How were you able to overcome these obstacles and form NAPO?

NAPO: First of all, NAPO was not the initial formation. Two or three other forms preceded NAPO, which was the result of ideological and practical struggle.

Again, it was when our motley group united and then dissolved again and again around crises situations, that presented us with the most glaring examples of the spontaneity that characterized our thought and practice. It was this situation of coming together and then breaking up, of not having an on-going program of any kind, that inspired us to pursue some form of structure that would provide continuity for our efforts.

We formed a Collective, and the "common program" was based on "the need for unity and continuity," but soon proved itself insufficient.

As We began to engage in practical struggles We discovered the need for more than an abstract unity achieved during, or because of, crisis situations. No matter what the particular situation — whether struggling around the latest case of pig brutality or making a Reading/Study List — ideological differences would arise. While We all claimed to be totally committed to "the struggle," it became clear that there were fundamentally different conceptions among us as to exactly what "the struggle" was about and how it should be carried on.

The content of agitation and propaganda wasn't politically consistent and it wasn't based on an exact appraisal of concrete conditions neither inside the kamp nor within the context of the overall struggle. It was necessary for us to

connect the beating of a prisoner to the beating of a Brother or Sister by the police on the street, and to connect both of these to CAUSES, and then to WAYS AND MEANS of eliminating these causes and creating a new situation for all of our people.

We confronted problems when it became clear that simply attempting formal organization on the basis of a fragile "unity around what We have most in common" would not take us very far. We needed a greater unity on the questions of CAUSES and WAYS AND MEANS. Those who believed that the struggle was one for New Afrikan national liberation could not function together, productively and with continuity, inside the same organization with those who believed otherwise. The situation might have worked out differently had We been intent on forming a coalition or a front. But We doubt it, since our study and experience had shown that even in coalitions and fronts there inevitably emerges one dominant line. The need for such a single dominant line was even greater in our situation, so, WE HAD TO ENGAGE IN IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE IN ORDER TO HAVE UNITY inside our ranks, and, based on this unity, be more successful in our practice.

1C. Q: Didn't the fact of creating a revolutionary organization inside the prison increase the prospect of repression against it?

NAPO: It would have, if We had been attempting to build a more-or-less "traditional" organization. You have to remember We were politically active before We were imprisoned. COINTELPRO revelations were just becoming more widespread, but many of us remembered the late 60's and early 70's, where We'd hold conversations with people expressing our beliefs that organizations were being infiltrated, comrads framed and railroaded; that phones were being tapped on a massive, systematic scale; that We were being

watched and manipulated — and We would then be called romantic and paranoid, and given long lectures explaining to us why things like that just couldn't happen in amerikkka.

So, We didn't set out to become an open, mass organization. We saw no reason why We should ask the kamp authorities or any arm of the imperialist state, for permission to organize and carry on activity. We saw no reason to announce our existence and to expose our members, and We began very early to gain experience in learning how an essentially clandestine organization can engage in mass work.

We were in effect, born in clandestinity, and We tried to apply those basic principles of clandestine practice which were known to us, and deemed by us to be appropriate for the type of war We fight and the concrete conditions of this war. We have of course made mistakes, and We're bound to make more of them. But We take ourselves, our beliefs, and our words and deeds very seriously, so We take our mistakes seriously, too, and We try to learn from them in order to prevent more of them in the future.

2. Q: Could you talk about the relationship between struggle in the Northern cities to the struggle for land-independence and socialism in the National Ter ritory? How does NAPO see this developing in this period?

NAPO: That is now being discussed inside our ranks, and there are only a few things We have definite positions on and which We're willing to discuss openly at present.

The National Territory is clearly the strategic area of struggle, and We believe that much more of our thought and practice has to reflect this fact. We're already encouraging more of our cadres to take up residence in the National Territory and to contribute to the development of programs based there or to be based there at some point in the future.

Viewing the National Territory as the strategic area of struggle implies that all activity outside its boundaries is basically of a tactical nature. It also has very heavy interrelationships to all other questions, and to all forms of struggle.

3. Q: What is NAPO's view on the role of Marxism-Leninism in the development of Revolutionary Black Nationalist politics and strategy?

NAPO: First of all, We aren't "black" nationalists, We're New Afrikans. If, as New Afrikans, We're dealing with revolutionary nationalist politics and strategy, which is truly in tune with concrete conditions We face as a nation, then We're dealing with NEW AFRIKAN revolutionary nationalist politics and strategy.

We use the term "revolutionary scientific socialism" rather than "Marxism-Leninism," or "Mao Tsetung Thought." We find that it helps us be more creative, less dogmatic, and more Afro-centric in its application.

We also believe that revolutionary nationalism is inherently socialist, and cannot be articulated or practiced without incorporating the general theoretical principles of revolutionary scientific socialism.

4. Q: What does NAPO view as necessary to advance the consolidation of New Afrikan national liberation struggle? How do you view the question of unity in the independence movement and the struggle taken as a whole?

NAPO: Our primary concern, in this period, is the consolidation of a center of leadership for the movement. And, more particularly, We're concerned with the consolidation of our organization. We believe that such consolidation is necessary to insure continuity in the thought and practice

of the movement, the winning of national independence, and consistency in the pursuit of the ultimate goals of the struggle.

We believe that this consolidation, for our own organization and for the movement, is the most appropriate organizational form for protracted people's war. Such a center has to have ideological homogeneity and organizational centralization.

In the past — and even in the present — many cadres have confused the organizational form required by a center of revolutionary leadership ("vanguard formation"), with the types of organizational forms more suited for mass organizations. Such confusion led to such things as the wide-spread condemnation of theoretical struggle, and the "mass work vs. armed work" debate. In the latter instance, it became a question of choosing one form at the expense of the other, rather than seeing that they both must be carried on simultaneously.

An example is the BPP, although it's not the only organization We can point to as an example. The Party split over the question of armed struggle — but the split didn't resolve the contradiction for those on either side, nor for the movement.

The contradictions reached the point of the split not only because there was no dominant line inside the Party to which all members would subordinate themselves. But each side of the contradiction presented a one-sided analysis of its position, and after the split, neither side carried its analysis further.

So, there was no legitimate center of revolutionary leadership inside the Party. In the absence of such a center, there was an absence of ability to develop a political line and strategy which could apply the simultaneous practice of armed and unarmed revolutionary struggle. Because there was no line, there was no development of appropriate organizational forms for carrying out both forms of work, and

allowing all work to be coordinated by a single center of leadership, according to the principle that centralization of the organization does not mean centralization of the movement, and the struggle.

In view of the present emphasis on consolidation inside our ranks, We view the question of unity with particular focus on class analysis, the dialectical and historical materialist method, and the general principles of revolutionary scientific socialism.

"Unity" has been, is, and will remain a problem for us as long as We fail to understand the existence of class divisions inside the nation, as well as inside the movement and even inside each organization.

A more firm grasp of DHM and revolutionary scientific socialist principles will help us to rid ourselves of naiveté, idealism, and primitiveness in our thought and practice.

The tendency now seems to be that "unity" means uniting with EVERYONE, at one moment in time, around a "common objective" which specifies both short and long range goals. We don't think this is realistic, possible, or desirable.

The New Afrikan Independence Movement is composed of several class forces which have general unity around the national reality. Like any other movement of this type, ours has been led by the dominant petty-bourgeois force. Also, each of the class forces interprets the objectives of the struggle differently, and moves to realize the objective according to their own vision and interests.

Our view is, the politics of the movement must shift, so that they represent the mass, or proletarian, vision and interests. Because of this, We're developing not only a minimum program, but a maximum program as well. The new society We struggle for takes its shape DURING the fight for independence, not after. Those who think they can wait until after independence before devising and implementing policies

and programs for building and defending the newly liberated nation, can surely not lead it.

So, We can unite as one organization around both a maximum and minimum program, and unite as allies and patriots around only a minimum program. Our primary base of support will be the class forces which are most consistently revolutionary, and which will see it as in their interests to creatively apply the principles of revolutionary scientific socialism during the national liberation struggle, and after independence.

5. Q: There's a lot of struggle over questions of leader ship and the kinds of formations and organizations that can and will lead the New Afrikan national libera tion struggle. This is the question of the development of vanguard — how does NAPO see this process happening?

NAPO: Clandestinely...and basically following the route discussed above.

6. Q: What role does the strategic unity of internally-oppressed nations play in a strategy to win New Afrikan national liberation and defeat imperialism? On what principles and strategy should/must this unity be based?

NAPO: The struggles of all internally oppressed nations and peoples have been historically inter-related. We all have a common enemy in imperialism, and the advanced sectors of each of our movements also target capitalism as an enemy. Land is another factor held in common, which implies the dissolution of the empire and the drawing of new boundaries. And of course We have in mind movements in Canada and Central America as well as those inside present

u.s. borders. From here, protracted people's war becomes a commonly held strategic method of realizing our objectives.

We believe there should be greater cooperation and coordination between our movements, but We also believe that the greatest expression of solidarity and the best contribution to the defeat of imperialism, is when each movement escalates its own struggle.

7. Q: What is the relationship (white) North American revolutionaries and anti-imperialists need to have to the internal national liberation struggles, and to the question of unity among the internally oppressed nations?

NAPO: We believe unity among internally oppressed nations is a question concerning those nations, and not North Americans.

We also believe that North Americans must de-emphasize their material support, and begin to place greater emphasis upon political support for national liberation struggles, both inside and outside u.s. borders. We believe that the"proximity" of oppressor nation organizations is harmful to the ideological and organizational development of our struggle. White folks are always underfoot, and under the guise of providing support for the movement, and accepting leadership from the national liberation movements, they usually end up determining the course of the movements or the particular organizations that they attach themselves to. While claiming to be revolutionaries and anti-imperialists, white folks end up avoiding anti-imperialist struggle and avoiding the awesome tasks of making revolution inside the oppressor nation. White/North Americans must find your own peculiar forms for armed and unarmed revolutionary anti-imperialist struggle, inside the oppressor nation – that's political support for national liberation struggles. Genuine

revolutionary, anti-imperialist solidarity, unity or support, is not philanthropy, but physical confrontation with your mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, and those who rule the imperialist state.

8. Q: What are the main strategic lessons to be learned from the history of the struggle in the 60's and early 70's, specifically from the BPP? What are the lessons to be learned from the first wave of the BLA? How do these both relate to the development of a strategy of protracted people's war inside u.s. borders?

NAPO: While We think there are several outstanding factors We can easily point to, We don't think the period has been studied thoroughly enough to enable us to say "THESE are the main strategic lessons." For example, most of the public material relating to the BPP concerns only one region, the West Coast, and not more than a few pages has been done concerning the positive and negative aspects of the early BLA.

There was, with hindsight, no genuine, experienced, revolutionary scientific socialist leadership, but rather a petty-bourgeois leadership which was largely student-based. Spontaneity and primitiveness characterized nearly everything We did, seen mainly by the absence of sober, well-thought out plans for carrying on a protracted people's struggle.

We talked about the "colonized nation," about the police as an occupying army, but We didn't build our formations or carry on our work as if We believed our own words.

We dealt mainly with two forms of struggle, but rather than seeing those forms as two aspects of one whole, We pitted them against each other—armed and unarmed struggle — and the relation between open and clandestine cadres, organizational forms and styles of work were never balanced. Armed actions in particular, were carried out in a one-

sided manner. Mass work was generally restricted in terms of the kinds of issues addressed, and narrow in the way it was conducted.

A third form of struggle, theoretical struggle, was under-rated and almost totally neglected. Further, revolution implies counter-revolution, and revolutionary preparation anticipates repression and the forms of struggle which will be necessary in the face of it. This means a center of leadership based in clandestinity, which is able to provide overall coordination to the whole movement and struggle. It means that being underground doesn't imply halting all activity, simply that the forms of certain activity must change while the leadership remains constant, and the momentum and development of the struggle maintains the highest level of continuity possible. Also repression has two sides, the velvet glove, as well as the iron fist. Most of us don't think of repression in this way, since We aren't used to dealing with the essence of things, and concern ourselves primarily with form. This is also seen in the fact that most of us still base our strategies on "legality" rather than "illegality," even though We claim to be engaged in a "war" which the enemy regards as "criminal" and "illegal."

"Education of the masses" was seen and carried out in a narrow way. Some of us believed, for instance, that our people instinctively understood "Black Power," so there was no need to explain it in any depth, even after it came under attack by the imperialist state and its lackeys inside the nation. Our people were willing to move, on the basis of their understanding of "Black Power" in particular, and national liberation in general, but that understanding was largely emotional, the consciousness embryonic. We had no sense of exactly what the goal was or how to reach it, and what the sacrifices and obstacles were.

This problem was related to one involving mass work inside mass organizations. The "education" was not de-

signed to prepare us for making the long haul, and security inside mass organizations was almost totally neglected and generally considered unnecessary. Of course, the main aspects of security in mass organizations is political education — but again, political education was seen and conducted in a very narrow way.

The idea that "the masses must learn from their own experiences" was and remains very widespread. Not so widespread is knowledge as to exactly how the masses were/are to learn from their experiences. While some folks evidently believed then, and continue to believe now, that the lessons would fall from the sky, others believed and still believe that the masses learn from their own experiences by the analyses of these experiences undertaken and provided by the vanguard. The lessons are drawn from these analyses and the vanguard involves the masses in the process, and provides them with the method used. The revolutionary leadership insures that experience is learned from by spreading the method of analysis among the masses; spreading the lessons among the masses, and on the basis of these lessons, raises the level of mass consciousness and the revolutionary content of the struggle.

Recent indications are that the BLA is beginning to address certain situations which have been of great concern to itself and to the entire movement. What stands out is the absence of ideology and strategy grounded in the New Afrikan experience. The BLA wanted to continue the tradition of resistance, and it did. But, it overlooked the difference between resistance and revolution.

The BLA compared itself to the Vietnamese NLF, FRELIMO, and the Tupamaros, but forgot or overlooked the fact that at the center of the NLF was the Party; FRELIMO provided leadership for the entire struggle, not just the "armed nucleus"; the Tupamaros had a maximum program as well as a minimum program, and were preparing them

selves to replace the government struggled against. There was a one-sided, over-estimation of the effects of armed actions, and an under-estimation of consciously created and directed mass support. There was a general dependence for mass support upon aboveground formations which weren't subordinate to the discipline of the BLA — in other words, an aboveground apparatus composed of BLA members, and therefore not dependent upon what is essentially the "good will" of other formations. There was also a great dependence upon the so-called support of oppressor nation organizations and individuals, rather than rooting its infrastructure among our own people, controlled by its own cadres.

9. Q: NAPO has referred to the struggle reaching a new stage when New Afrikan women become massively political. Can you say what this means strategically in this period in terms of women's participation in the national liberation struggle, and the relationship of women's emancipation to national liberation?

NAPO: We believe that part of the reason for the movement now being so dominated by petty-bourgeois politics, is that the petty-bourgeois leadership is predominantly male and sexist. The types of discipline that they exhibit is of course petty-bourgeois, but our experience has been that Sisters inside such organizations have the capacity and the willingness to exhibit a revolutionary, a more proletarian discipline. The more politically active such Sisters become inside their organizations, the more initiative they exercise, the more leadership responsibility they assume without regard for the sensibilities of Brothers, then the struggle will clearly take a qualitative leap. We'll have more Sisters as theorists and not just as figurehead chairpersons of community mass organizations.

While We don't accept the view that traditional

Afrikan societies were classless, We do believe that contradictions between men and women existed in these societies prior to any foreign contact. Kidnapping and enslavement didn't eliminate this contradiction. The contradiction had its particular expressions on the Continent, and the loss of independence and national oppression gave the contradiction an expression unique to New Afrikan people.

The struggle for independence and socialism is indeed REVOLUTIONARY, because it must "overturn" relations inside the nation as well as relations between the nation and the imperialist state. For us, the struggle is based as much on the principles of anti-sexism, as on the principles of anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism.

We should also say that our position on this question has been formed in part by rejection of the slogan "triple jeopardy" which some continue to use in describing the oppression of New Afrikan women. We reject this slogan because it muddles the distinction between oppressed, and oppressor, nations, and in practice is used to liquidate the reality of the nation's existence and the national liberation struggle, in favor of a "multinational working class movement," which is simply unreal.

10. Q: Could you speak about the role of POW's in the struggle? How should they be supported, on what terms and strategies? In particular, could you address the questions of legality, reliance on the courts, the legitimacy of the state, and the kinds of campaigns that should be built around POW's and prisons, as the struggle intensifies?

NAPO: We believe the characterization of POW's is a fundamental, strategic, political issue, which shouldn't be subject to theoretical concessions or compromise of principles, especially when the support or non-support of POW's

is involved. We believe POW's should be supported on the terms and strategies that they themselves establish, which in most cases will be done by the organization or organizations to which the POW's belong.

There is no question inside this organization that the imperialist state is not "legitimate," and therefore neither are its courts and laws. It is very difficult for us to understand how organizations which have openly declared themselves to be at war with the u.s. imperialist state can deny POW status to ALL of its members, especially when members openly declare themselves as members. Everyone in prison wants to get out, but decisions have to be made as to whether the desire to get out, or politics, will be in command...

We've previously stated that existence of POW's is one concrete proof of the nation's reality. In the same ways, We believe that the basis of support for POW's has to be support of the national liberation struggle. In particular, the terms of support and the strategies of support for POW's can't be separated from the ideology and strategy put forward for the struggle as a whole. Problems arise, though, in view of the fact that there is no dominant ideology and strategy, so the present confusion around POW's is understood in this light.

The BLA itself, as one example, doesn't seem to know whether its members are POW's, Political Prisoners, or amerikkkan citizens who have simply been unequally treated and unjustly convicted. This would seem to indicate that the BLA doesn't know what it is...Or, the BLA knows what it is, but is willing to compromise its principles in order to obtain so-called support. If advanced elements don't know the difference between a Political Prisoner and a POW, and the political significance of each, or, if they are unwilling or unable to make the choice between the political support suited to each, then how much moreso must such confusion and/or unwillingness prevail among the masses?

As We said, support for POW's must be based on support of the national liberation struggle. Supporting the national liberation struggle involves accepting the reality of the NATION, the difference between the nation and the imperialist state/oppressor nation, and the necessity to wage the national liberation struggle by the strategic use of armed force.

So, those who want support for POW's and who want to support POW's, must give greater initiative to enforcing the nation's reality; to heightening the contradictions between the oppressed and the oppressor nations, and to giving greater legitimacy to the effort to liberate the nation by armed force.

The basic question around support for POW's is, "Why?": Either We're a NATION, or We aren't; either We're a nation at war, or We aren't. Either We define the nation, and the war, ourselves, or continue to let white folks or the negro-petty-bourgeoisie define it.

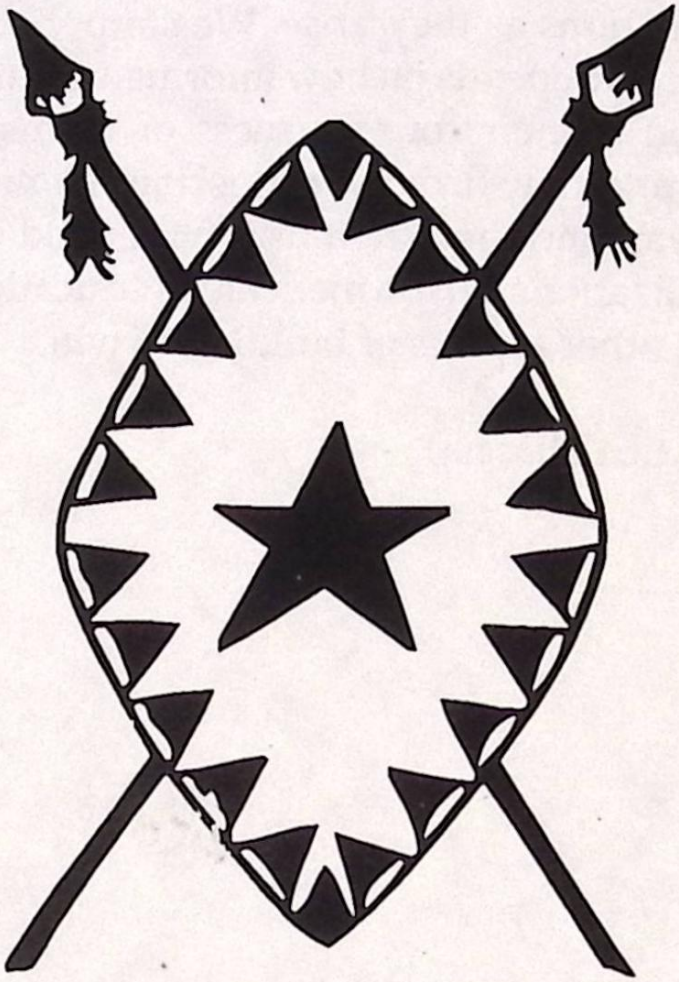
If politics remain in command on this question, then the types of campaigns launched around POW's and prisons would seem to base themselves only secondarily on such things as marches, rallies, and meetings which usually involve leading cadres of organizations. We continue to ask the people to come to us, rather than us going to the people.

Support for POW's is not just support for particular individuals, no matter how outstanding they may be. Support for POW's is support for a struggle in general, and for organizations or an organization in particular, and the line and practice of that organization. In this light, support for POW's becomes one aspect of the total support given to an organization or organizations, and it can begin to take both direct and indirect forms. It will have to be measured not only by the numbers of people who attend the annual rallies, but by the numbers of people who perform day-to-day tasks without any publicity; by amounts of money given with no

questions asked and no strings attached; by the number of people who will allow their homes to be used for various purposes, etc.

So, types of campaigns are essentially tactical concerns which are subordinate to strategy, and will largely depend on situations as they arise. We simply believe that everything We do depends on how informed the masses are, how developed is their consciousness of themselves as a nation at war, and how firm their conscious commitment to winning the war, and that We must not depend on general calls and mobilizations, but on meticulous education, organization, and all other aspects of building to win.

(For NAPO: Atiba Shanna)



Spear & Shield Publications
1340 W. Irving Park
Suite 108
Chicago, IL 60613